

River Reverie

Is the Sea a Monster
or a Friend of Man?

By THE REV. CANON ROBERT MERRY

I felt a tingling up and down my spine as I sat on the capping of the new concrete bulkhead below the Blue Fish River Bridge on a recent afternoon as the incoming tide filled the river banks. I watched the swift tidal current swirl under the stone arch of the bridge and recalled how a current-like this 70 years or so ago almost welcomed me into a watery departure from the planet.

I had stopped off at the bridge and firehouse (now the harbor master's boathouse) to inspect the new bulkhead the town's Department of Public Works had just completed. It is a splendid job. Walter Tonaszuck, our DPW director, talked about it with me over the phone saying its 3 concrete beams are a replacement for the 3 wooden ones that lay here perpendicular to the street many years ago. They are sitting at a depth of 15 feet in hard clay bottom and should last for many years. The cost was about \$15,000 from the Hathaway Fund, a

flushed out. I spell this out in some detail as this piece of engineering work, while good for the river's ecology, almost did me in one hot summer afternoon.

This is a story I have never told before as the following recital of events will explain. Its recollection was one reason my spine tingled that afternoon. It so happened that half a dozen kids were swimming in the gate-locked pond with a rapidly moving out-going tide. We were playing a game of "chicken" to see how close we could come to the tunnel without being swept over the gates into the miniature Niagara formed by the swirling waters. My uncle, an ice man whose route began at his ice house on Round Pond had joined us after a hot day on his route. He was bored by our kid performance and his 250-pound hulk of flesh and bone was swishing out in the distance like a whale and making great waves and aquatic noises. Of course I was the most daring and was carried over the falls into the swirling whirlpools and salt water suds below. I swallowed quantities of water, and did not have the strength to break out of the reverse flow of water but circled around and around calling out "Help" with what I was sure was my last breath. Suddenly my uncle who had sensed the situation swam like an angry walrus right

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point which was the scene of another near miss at a drowning, or perhaps it was closer to a freezing. This is how it happened:

My father had asked my brother Harry to deliver a loin of pork to the Reynolds family on Surplus St. The Reynolds were the other family in town that had 9 children and they were awfully good customers for my father's retail meat business. Henry had 2 options, 1) he could go to the barn and hitch up the horse and wagon in these days before we had autos or 2) he could hoof it all the 4 miles over and back in the frigid dark of the dimly lighted streets. The thermometer stood about 10 or 15 degrees above zero. It would have been a cold and lonely trip so he turned to me and whispered, "If you'll come along we can go by the river."

This excited me and we set off down back of Lawson's meadow and onto the river, looking so inviting with its 8-inch cakes bordering the banks and a glistening center of solid smooth ice. We were forbidden to walk on salt water ice except at low tide so this aspect of the situation added new glamour. Unhappily the tide was coming in and as we skidded along in our heavy winter boots we could feel the lifting of the ice pad we were walking on. We were still a couple feet below the level of the river bank and the problem of getting to land was looming ahead of us. I leaped on an ice cake and made shore, but the ice cake slid down and under the main river ice and left Henry standing with the package of pork in his hands. This he tossed to me and then rather gingerly, stepped onto an ice cake that immediately slipped out from under him and he found himself up to his neck in freezing salt water.

Now with nothing to lose, he scrambled up the mudbank and shouted over his shoulder, "I'm going to freeze to death unless I run all the way over the fields to the Reynolds' house. Follow me as best you can." So up the hill he ran past Knowles Parker's cowbarn. Knowles came out, milk pail in hand, and called to Henry, "You'll be OK if you just keep running."

I pulled up at the Reynolds' house several minutes later quite winded from my running attempt to keep up with Henry. Mrs. Reynolds had seized the moment understanding perfectly what had happened and filling the bath tub with scalding water plunged Henry in clothes and all. She was on the phone with father when I came in the door. "This young man has had enough punishment already for his misbehavior and unless you



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Photo by Deni Johnson



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Many thoughts swam through my mind as I sat there watching that tide. It was an 11-foot or "high course" tide as we used to call them so the current was correspondingly fast. This kind of tide was used by Walter Prince when he leased a Boston tugboat to move the last of the Wright houses by barge from the beach around Standish Shore to the end of Landing Rd. where it now has stood since the 1920's. I thought too, as I sat there, that I was occupying the spot where the water wheel of the tidal-powered Grist Mill used to rotate. The bridge of stone I was also looking at was built in 1881 replacing a wooden one erected by Joshua Winsor in the 1850's with a draw to allow hulls of ships built up river to pass out into the outer river where they would be finished for sea voyages. Joshua was the low bidder for the job at \$1500. This bridge was a replacement for the original one built in 1803, also with a draw. How people living on Powder Point managed without a bridge of some sort for over 150 years always puzzled me. The little firehouse behind me used to stand over on Cedar St. and was moved to the present spot presumably to be near Brigg's livery stables for easily available horse transportation. I was paid \$10 a month during the cold weather to keep a low coal fire going in a small cast iron stove and warm the building for an easy cranking start of the little model T Ford fire wagon that had neither a self-starter nor anti-freeze.

The building served in the 30's as a combination band rehearsal center and community hall for baked bean suppers and fire drills.

Shortly after this present stone bridge was completed, an aesthetic feature was added in the shape of 2 massive oaken gates that opened and shut with the action of the tide, fetching up on a large wooden beam suspended by steel rods from the center of the arch. This provided a full pond in a beautiful setting rather than the former mud flats. I don't know who was responsible for this added item to the bridge, but I suspect it was the Duxbury (then) Rural Society founded 2 years later and active in beautifying the town. I do have minutes of the Society that record an outlay of \$10 cash annually to Tony Lucas for locking the gates open periodically. Tony owned and operated a barber shop on the river's inner bulkhead.

I remember him standing in his dory kept moored to the bulkhead wall and paddling with one oar to the gates at the precise moment the tide was turning and looping chains over the gate uprights so the little pond would be

over the gates, and grabbing me by the neck, whirled me over to the side of the bridge tunnel and shouted, "Now stand up." And this is the embarrassing part: I stood up and the water came only to my waist. I do have the firm conviction that I would certainly have drowned in that 3-foot deep current and waterfall if I had not been rescued. That was the first thought that came to me as I watched that current today.

I was part of another near-drowning one summer afternoon when 6 Tenderfoot scouts among whom I was one were playing on the shore at low tide. We were forbidden to go near the river at low tide except for clamming because there was a hole about 8 feet deep and 25 feet across and our parents feared that the quick drop off would panic us and we would fall in. There were a half dozen ship ways still remaining from the great ship building days and they were smooth and slimy. It was great fun to take a running start, leap onto these muddy ways and skid into the waterhole with a big splash. All of us were having a great time in this dangerous activity when suddenly we looked around and there were only 5 of us. A quick roll call revealed that Clifton Chandler or "Kick" as we called him was missing and there was only one place he could be -- at the bottom of that 8-foot hole. Without a moment's hesitation we put our scout training to work (we were all about 10 years old) and formed a human chain, the biggest going down underwater where he grabbed "Kick" by the hair of the head and brought him back to shore, pale as a ghost and badly water-logged. We took turns now at artificial respiration and pretty soon he opened his eyes much to our relief and said, "Oh, I heard the most wonderful music." I phoned Clifton a year or so ago in an earlier account of this incident and he did indeed remember this rescue.

"Do you remember telling us about that wonderful music?" I asked.

"No, I don't remember that but I remember having a terribly sore scalp for a week afterwards where I was grabbed by the hair," he said.

The Blue Fish river is primarily a tidal river. It has 2 fresh water inputs from a brook beyond Pilgrim Byway and from the North Hill Marsh that winds around and through Hound's Ditch entering Wright's Dike and thence into the river at the town landing just off the corner of St. George St. When I was growing up the river was much wider and deeper. The fill from the dredging of the town anchorage in 1937 deposited just north of Harrison St. made it much narrower at that

point which was the scene of another near miss at a drowning, or perhaps it was closer to a freezing. This is how it happened:

I pulled up at the Reynolds' house several minutes later quite winded from my running attempt to keep up with Henry. Mrs. Reynolds had seized the moment understanding perfectly what had happened and filling the bath tub with scalding water plunged Henry in clothes and all. She was on the phone with father when I came in the door. "This young man has had enough punishment already for his misbehavior and unless you promise to forego anymore, I'll keep him right here with my family. Harvey's clothes are a perfect fit for him and he's doing just fine."

I don't remember what happened after this. Probably the Reynolds hitched up their horse and drove us home that winter night, but I have always remembered the falling ice cake, the run against freezing to death and the forthright manner in which Mother Reynolds took command and brought peace and harmony and good health, too, from a near catastrophe. I think I recall Henry didn't even get a sniffle from his cold salt water experience.

As I draw this essay to a close and reflect back on this water reverie, I am perplexed by my recollections. I had enjoyed this river, learning to swim here and dive from the bridge first from the junction of the gates and then from the bridge railing itself. I had fished here catching flounder and cod and the repulsive skulpin. I had boated and had many delightful moments here. So why was it that what really stuck in my mind were these near tragic episodes? Was this a visceral return to the Biblical aversion to the sea as a monster, inimical to man's destiny that God had to forge apart much as underwater construction workers have to do work at deep water levels in a "diving bell." (See Genesis, Chapter 1, V. 6-8).

The human race has a double view of the sea. First in the spirit of John Masfield's "Sea Fever" -- and the seafaring peoples like the Vikings and the Phoenicians exemplified this. But there is another and perhaps stronger tradition that looks upon the sea as a monster, uncontrollable by man that rises up in storms and devastates his achievements on the stable earth. This view looks upon land as security and the sea as danger. We have done a fair job at subduing the land to our benefit, building houses, highways and monuments to our forebears, but the sea still remains untamable; to venture upon it with trepidation knowing its treachery. Today indeed we are warned that the sea is staging a counter-attack in that global warming will melt the polar ice caps drowning our coastal cities in ten or twelve feet of water in a few thousand years.

Could it be that the tingling I thought was in my spine that afternoon was not in my spine at all, but were quite simply far distant echoes of the primordial past where man regarded the sea as his enemy, from which he had wrested his freedom? It is indeed something to ponder.

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